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**Title:** When two worlds collide: Critical reflection on co-production.

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** This paper reports the findings from reflexive data collection on the evolving co-production research relationship between the two ‘worlds’ of community and academia: people with lived experience and community their intermediaries and academic researchers. It reports analysis of reflections on experience as the different partners explore and evaluate their own experiences of co-productive research within the context of substance use recovery co-production research.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The research uses reflexive data from perspectives of an intermediary community partner, academic partners, and community researchers on experiences of a series of co-productive research projects. The aim is to identify thematic features of the co-productive experiences from different positions and through the process of adaptation to a co-productive relationship.

**Findings:** This paper outlines what has been learnt from the experience of co-production and what has ‘worked’ for community and academic partners; around the nature of co-production, barriers to performance, and its value to participants and the wider recovery research agenda.

**Originality/value:** This paper reports a unique perspective on a developing methodology in health and social care, contributing to a growing body of knowledge pertaining to experiences of co-production research.

**Keywords:** Co-production, recovery, substance use, reflection, research.

## **Introduction**

This paper reports findings from reflexive data collection and analysis on processes of co-production research from the diverse world-views of community recovery partners and academics involved in a series of co-production research activities, collectively titled ‘Recovery Voice in Action’. The project

series was an exploration of the meaning of recovery as understood by people with lived experience of substance use recovery. It involved community organisation to facilitate data collection via participant-controlled computer-assisted structured interviewing (The VoiceBox) (see Cox et al., 2016), using a co-production approach to method design, data collection and interpretation. Involved partners were academic researchers, in-recovery community members and a community intermediary. A key aspect of this series was the incorporation of people in recovery as VoiceBox, 'crew' as community researchers; design consultants, recruiters/outreach, interviewers and data interpreters. 'Recovery Voice in Action' was a community project of involvement and engagement, consisting of a loose affiliation of in-recovery members around the VoiceBox (Crew), community intermediary (AC) and academic facilitators (LW and NC).

### ***Co-Production***

Co-production is becoming increasingly important to health care research as it meets the current requirements for patient and public involvement and the need to produce impact which is meaningful to end-users of services (Department of Health, 2006). As an approach to evidence-based practice, it has become part of the United Kingdom's (UK) health policy that adopts a 'citizen consumer' approach, ensuring that end-users of services and the community are involved in commissioning, prioritising and collaborating in health research (Shippee et al., 2013).

Co-production is becoming adopted across the public sector in the UK in recognition that it improves service planning, local representation and the adoption of local knowledge, and improves engagement and ownership among community members (Coote, 2002; Needham and Carr, 2009). The key principles of co-production research are argued to be mutual consultation and decision-making between stakeholders, resulting in a sharing of diverse knowledge between professionals and the communities affected by the research (Nowotney et al., 2001). However, co-production methodologies are said to be challenging for a number of issues. Co-production challenges the conventions of 'traditional' research by being trans-disciplinary and removed from traditional academic organisation (Gillard et al., 2012), with few models or guidelines for its performance (Kothari and Armstrong, 2011). However, Durose et al. (2011) argue that, while it also challenges conventional methodologies by its reflexivity, it has become a vehicle for social justice, enabling democratic knowledge production and grassroots representation. In this way, for Durose et al. (ibid.), it reduces the power differential between the expert and the layperson.

There are many examples of co-production in mental healthcare, and a growing body of knowledge which explores methods and challenges. For example, Manikam et al. (2016) use co-production to determine community mental health priorities among UK South Asian families, finding themes emerging from the community researchers not anticipated by the academic partners. Reeve et al. (2016) collaborated with voluntary sector and primary care providers to roll out a complex care model, finding the need for ongoing flexibility in response to challenges encountered. It is however recognised that co-production is demanding of time, resources and commitment (Walter et al. 2003; Sadler et al., 2017), and requires leadership, purpose and the right mix of partners and roles (Hunter and Perkins, 2014). For people with alcohol use problems, it is recognised that, while involvement in research can be part of the recovery process, stigma and the risk of relapse makes this group of co-producers particularly vulnerable and presents additional responsibility to academic partners in research (Alcohol Research UK, 2017).

Agreed key principles across different areas of healthcare co-production are the reduction of the power differential between agents and equal exchange of knowledge. For Boyle et al. (2010), this means recognising and valuing the assets and strengths of end users, addressing whole person (and community) contexts and adopting holistic approaches to solutions.

### ***Co-production principles and challenges***

The discussion paper by Boyle et al. (ibid.) reports on an exploration with co-production practitioners in the UK to identify key approaches in making co-production a mainstream method for inclusive approaches in public service development. They suggest that co-production demonstrates specific elements in recognising people as assets and enhancing these, working equally and in partnership (mutuality and reciprocity), working with peer support networks, and having integrated partnership-working between different agents. For the academic partner, the role should be one of facilitating rather than leading or delivering. In the N8/ESRC-supported exploration of co-production research projects, Campbell and Vanderhoven (2016) describe co-production as a meta-methodology in which boundaries between pure and applied research are blurred, and a process that confers public benefits beyond academia or professional practice. They argue that co-production research should still strive for academic excellence but should also present flexible working between partners to produce inclusive and actionable evidence.

The principles of co-production present a challenge to conventional research for Pain et al., (2015). They suggest that the 'donor-recipient' model (Pain et al., 2015: 12) of top-down, academically-informed practice or policy recommendations, is not compatible with co-production methodology. It could be argued then that co-production requires an epistemological paradigm shift especially, as Pain et al. (ibid.) argue, to capitalise on the value-added aspects afforded by co-production.

The mutuality and reciprocity principle of co-production suggests, for Boyle et al. (2010), a sharing of responsibility and expectancies and, as expressed by Wehrens (2014), an interdependent flow of knowledge in which partners are not seen as existing in different, rigid, domains but where boundaries become negotiated and flexible. To achieve this principle, the research process should involve all relevant partners (Hunter and Perkins, 2014) and be meaningful (Garfield et al., 2016), so that the research question and project planning are as much driven by the community members as professional researchers or policy-makers.

Durose et al., (2015) suggest that the credibility and methodologies of co-produced research impact on the quality of the evidence. As co-production lends itself to qualitative approaches, evidence produced would not be highly rated in traditional research hierarchies. However, this may be part of the paradigm shift of co-production in that the evidence should strive to have greater strengths in its applicability, especially as it can lead to stronger ecological 'ownership'. This also means a different approach to dissemination. Durose et al. (2011) indicate that there is accountability to, and within, the partner communities, that dissemination may inevitably become activist in promoting change in the light of community-produced evidence. This has implications for the researcher who is more normally charged to remain the objective, reflective scientist.

While co-production addresses the problems of injustices of representation, and offers a methodology for research to broaden the knowledge capture, its adoption as a legitimate and valued contribution to actionable evidence currently outstrips the recognition of, and response to, the ethics challenges it presents. Vayana and Tasoulas (2013) and Durose et al (2015) all recognise that the methodology firstly is required to be scientifically rigorous, and this is to meet an ethical consideration of research burden on participants as much as a research quality need. However, it is also argued that researchers often under-appreciate why people engage in research by ignoring altruistic motivations, and base participant involvement on a protectionist approach, so presenting

barriers to valuable and ethically appropriate research insights (Cox and McDonald, 2013). Therefore, the qualitative nature of the evidence should be valued as research evidence, and that co-production has the potential to contribute value-added authentic and trustworthy evidence that has applicability.

It is suggested here that the overall challenge for co-production research is managing the conflicting demands of conventional research with effective co-production methodologies. The demands of co-production research may be incompatible with traditional forms of research (Pain et al., 2015) that best utilise the expert-participant/subject forms of methodology such as comparison and experimental studies. This paper collates reflections of researching co-productively in the field of recovery from problem substance use to address the challenges found from the experiences of co-production partners. The aim is to create a working *aide memoire*, using accessible language, for the process of co-production research between the two worlds of academia and those who are often marginalised and stigmatised, such as people with lived experience of substance use recovery.

### ***Recovery Voice in Action***

Evidence for this paper came from multiple reflexive data sources within the Recovery Voice in Action project, conducted over a three-year period (2013-2016). VoiceBox Inc, a community research organization and the project intermediary, undertook a commissioned evaluation of The Brink, a dry bar in Liverpool, run by a national drug and alcohol treatment service. The evaluation gathered a range of digital assets including film, photography and audio recordings of interviews, stories and testimonies relating to experiences of recovery.

After completion, the participants and VoiceBox Inc continued working together forming the 'Voices from the Brink' community research 'Crew' to explore the value of the digital assets in providing a better understanding of the meaning of recovery. Academic researchers were invited to join the project and a relationship was developed based on knowledge exchange and asset sharing. A series of questions were developed by the Crew that were then explored through a traditional sequence of engagement, data collection, analysis and dissemination/showcasing, with over 300 people at diverse recovery events. Both event attendees and the recovery community researchers themselves were interviewed as part of this research. Interview questions were specific to each event and

focused on the experience of recovery, recovery identity and mutual aid. This data was captured in video diaries, blogs and recorded interviews.

At the same time, there was a rolling programme of data capture of participant action research (PAR), using both formal and informal critical reflection to monitor and observe the process of co-production work. This set of data occurred in the form of de-briefing discussions, dissemination planning and informal reflection, and captured as video diaries, written notes, blogs or recorded interviews. Through reflection on the PAR process, research members thus explored 'what works', identifying barriers, facilitators and practical and theoretical constructs that help explain, critique and define co-production research.

## **Methodology**

Gillard et al. (2012) suggest that reflection on the processes of co-production research presents an opportunity to explore stakeholder involvement in research, and that reflexive approaches offer a useful tool in exploring this methodology. In this paper we have adopted a reflexive process through the collection and analysis of the documented experiences of co-production research during the Voices in Action project. Ethnographic reflexive strategies during research procedures allow the researchers to reflect on the experience in process (Pelias, 2016). This approach to ethnography meets co-production research principles by acknowledging that all informants are knowledgeable of the context, it accommodates the temporality of the social context and ensures that the data (text and digital formats) are part of the social context (Smith et al., 2006).

## ***Data collection and analysis***

Reflexive material was collected from all three partners (community researchers, academic researchers, community intermediary) over the three-year period in the form of individual and group reflections, gathered contemporaneously in written and digital formats, including diary entries, showcasing presentations, film and audio recordings. As described above, reflections on the process of co-productive partnership working were continuous throughout the whole project between academic, community intermediary and partners with lived experience. The project series afforded opportunities for all partners to discuss methods of working, identify barriers and to problem-solve, while exploring and testing the principles of co-production and reflecting on the barriers and facilitators.

The principles of co-production underpinned the analytical approach. Partners met opportunistically during research project and dissemination events or meetings at which reflections were recorded. Analysis of material was iterative: over the duration of the meetings consensus-seeking discussion took place which enabled participants to organise and 'make sense' of experiences of the co-production process. Analysis of reflexive material took into account contexts of data collection and the impact upon each set of partners. At the same time, informal discussion took place throughout the project series to address issues arising from the friction between co-production and conventional research processes.

## **Findings**

The reflections identified 'clash points' of the different ways of understanding (Popay, 2006), termed here '*rub*', where co-production methodology and procedure clashed with traditional research methods, producing barriers to inclusion, empowerment, representation. The reflections also served to identify the problem-solving approaches used to ensure the research process adhered to co-production principles while ensuring quality findings. From this came the 'R' themes; a checklist of consistent themes in co-productive accessible language that illustrate the challenge to more conventional research; how it is valued, assumptions of what research is, procedural barriers to authenticity and representation, and issues of participant engagement and meaningful inclusion. They are placed in alphabetical order as the research team concluded that no one was more important than any other.

### ***The 'R' themes of recovery co-production***

#### ***Reach***

A key factor from the outset was that the outcomes of co-produced research would be shared with a wider group of stakeholders than would normally have access to 'traditional' research outlets such as peer-reviewed academic papers. As the community researchers (people with lived experience) were actively involved in the research process, they had a stake in the research and understood it. Channels of communication and research translation became embedded in the co-productive process throughout, with community researchers extending the methods and routes to dissemination. Snowballing became commonplace, working through recovery communities and networks (face to face and virtual), enabling the research to get very close to the issues through the people experiencing them;



*This research means something to us – it’s grounded in who we are and what we know – we want people to hear about it and to learn from it – me taking this to the services and groups that I know or talking to others and getting them to talk about it is important to me – I want to get this out there (community researcher).*

### *Reason*

Our reflections highlighted that reasons for initial and ongoing participation varied considerably for different people and changed over time. For community researchers the fundamental reason was predominantly to promote recovery and help others. This was clearly a positive factor in sustaining the research process and ‘pushing’ for the activity to be extended wider than the original focus. Whilst it is not the intention to negate personal motivations of academics, the agenda was inevitably linked to the university role and the need to demonstrate research activity. Motivating factors for academic researchers and their institution were to produce research for career purposes or for the organisation to improve its Research Excellence Framework ratings. It was also clear that research activity goals can often be governed by the funder. During the life of the project, some funding was accessed, but most was without external resources. This led to different outcome expectations. Where funding was secured, traditional research outcomes (practice recommendations, reporting, dissemination) continued to be used as benchmarks for success, and to signify the completion of the research activity. Therefore funders’ expectations were privileged over community needs and goals. Although a lack of funding presented significant barriers for community researchers, it afforded a level of flexibility and freedom to enable the partners to allow the research agenda to unfold. Overall, the sense was that the challenges and implications of co-production were poorly accommodated by the university’s institutional processes, which meant support was experienced as tokenistic and even obstructive.

### *Reciprocity*

Community researchers appeared less comfortable with sharing knowledge than academic researchers. This illustrated an issue particularly with working with communities in which low self-esteem and stigmatisation are barriers to inclusion, such as a recovery community. Although community researchers initially struggled to acknowledge their power in the knowledge they possess through their experience and its value to the research, there was a clear shift over time as a

co-productive culture ‘bedded in’ and a co-producing research group identity (*communitas*) (see Cox et al, 2016) emerged.

### *Recovery*

The process of being involved in research made a positive contribution to people’s recovery. This included people’s understanding of themselves as people, and as people in recovery, with many examples pointing to individuals’ self-learning, the impact of sharing experiences and the self-esteem that came with realising the importance of their role in the research;

*What comes up for me is the level of growth, for me personally and for others in the Crew. When we first talked about the idea of research, I thought it was something that people from universities did and came and asked questions...I wasn’t long out of treatment and my recovery was my priority, not talking to people about research. I now know that it’s not like that. Being part of this has been part of my recovery...I’m a researcher in my own life and helping others in similar situations to me.. that’s so good for my recovery (community researcher).*

*I’ve been in recovery for a while..I’m used to talking with people within the groups I go to and sharing my story, my expertise. But this has taken me outside of that and connected me with people who don’t know about recovery. It’s shocked me how much I’ve grown and how my thoughts have broadened (community researcher).*

### *Relationship*

This area was the one that had the most impact for all of the partners. The growing relationship between each of the participants was crucial to the whole approach to delivering something that had been genuinely co-produced. Relationships formed and were based upon a real and deep understanding of each other as individuals and also their positions and experiences (academic and lived). It allowed all parties to take risks and created a richer dialogue and led to the robustness of the data analysis and understanding of the material produced.

### *Reward*

The principles of co-production emphasise the essential element that everyone benefits from the involvement (Boyle et al., 2010). It proved important that all partners acknowledged and shared

what the benefit was for them. These rewards were naturally different and reflected the reasons partners wanted to be involved. In recovery from addiction, a key 'reward' appeared to be enacting the principles of recovery through helping others, combating stigmatisation and having a voice. Other types of 'reward' included the perceived credibility of being associated with a higher education institution and engaged on 'proper' research. Although this was identified as a positive outcome to an extent, it also stimulated feelings of 'rub' (see below) where the perceived status of each partner was different.

### *Risk*

Here, risk is seen as encapsulating the experience of feeling unsafe or threatened by the research process. Feeling unsafe for community researchers was described as being out of their comfort zone, and feeling inadequate or being judged in academic environments. However, risk and threat were experienced by academic researchers too and this suggests the discomfort of being beyond the power relationship of being 'the expert';

*I noticed I got panicky thinking that we had to be doing this and this otherwise the funders get upset and the Dean gets upset. It felt 'risky' to be letting go of this control and allow other people to take over. Even talking about it in this way just shows how the traditional research relationship starts getting into a power relationship (academic researcher).*

*Risk* was also identified with 'rub' (discussed below) where conflicting notions of ethical risk emerged from different values among the different partners.

### *Robustness*

Here the concern was always around how much the research would be seen as robust in conventional research terms, for example, having a research question in mind that could be tested through well-established research approaches in data collection and analysis. What was found was that robustness came from the authenticity of the data collected by being able to get 'up close and personal'; a key benefit of the co-productive research process, allowing the research team to reframe what was meant by 'robust'. By using each person's experiences as a resource, the whole process was more robust than it otherwise would have been as there were more checks and balances, particularly in relation to the authenticity of the data and its interpretation.

### *Rub*

These clashes between the partners often came from different background experiences, training and organizational culture. These became a valued and valuable part of the research process leading to more discussion and debate than otherwise would have happened. Language was identified as a key exemplar of power 'rub'; while community researchers initially felt depowered by use of research and academic language, academics felt challenged to 'give away' the power it conferred, and equally experienced recovery language and exclusiveness as a barrier. Over time, the process became one of more shared understanding rather than merely translation and terminology;

*I used to switch off when they started talking about data this and data that, but I noticed now that it was my stuff – I knew what it meant but thought it was all 'poncy crap' and better than me. Talking about how we talked about things was what made the difference (for us all)...we all learned new words and stuff (community researcher).*

Power is also pre-eminent in research language and processes: co-production research is *still* research and as such may still become entwined by academic processes. In order to meet the needs for research excellence, there remains a requirement to either identify methods for methodological rigour (i.e. respondent validation) that are appropriate to co-productive enquiry, or deploy concepts that emphasise the particular strengths of co-production, such as authenticity and applicability. Ethical considerations, too, provided friction points that exposed the power differentials between academic and community researchers (see 'risk' above). Academia is charged with responsibility for participants of research via ethical oversight. Academics often want to commit to the ideals of co-productive research, but they are professionally accountable and are locked into institutional – and not community - notions of risk. The two communities (community and university) frame risk differently. This responsibility inevitably puts the academic partner into a paternalistic role, held institutionally responsible for the safety of partners and involved others. Having to impose ethical procedures on to participants emphasises the 'them and us' relationship, but at the same time, training community partners to become researchers and comply with research processes felt less like empowering participants as making them more like 'us'.

*It's not that there's nothing to learn but the most important thing that I bring is my experience and that, when I share it and use it, it's good for the research. I sort of get the*

*thing about being anonymous but sometimes I thought it was over the top – I didn't need to be protected, it was about visible recovery (community researcher).*

The use of 'R' to identify the themes has been useful to support a need for creativity to the process of reflection. It becomes a tangible product of the reflection process which is intended to be a useful 'checklist', or an *aide memoire*, for when the different 'worlds' of recovery community and academia struggle to share the same language and perception of the co-production research process. The reflection process identified these common themes not only from the experiences of difficulty, but also from the problem-solving process, working together over time enabled us to resolve some of the tensions outlined here and find common ground.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this research was not to reduce the notion of co-production to a definitive set of variables, but to explore the experience of doing co-production research. This formed the 'R' theme checklist. This experience opens up fundamental questions about the very nature of research, the relational essence of co-production and its practical challenges for individuals, organisations and systems.

The 'R' theme contents are not exhaustive but are ones that occurred across a range of contexts or were considered to have a significant impact by the project team. The intention is not to describe 'good' and 'bad' approaches to co-production but to reflect upon the experiences of engaging in this methodology in a manner that models co-production itself.

In these reflections, the '*reach*' theme illustrates how our co-production enquiries achieved the 'as close to the actors' authenticity as recommended by Ostrom's (2005) definition of co-production. This appears to have been achieved through the snowballing afforded by the natural networking of community researchers and the commitment engendered through having ownership of the process and the outcomes. The commitment of people in recovery to give back to others and use recovery as mutual aid felt particularly relevant to the '*reasons*' for engagement and willingness to make use of the opportunities to promote their own and others' recovery. This appeared to be the altruism identified as under-appreciated and under-used by Cox and McDonald (2013). The 'fit' between

mutual aid and co-production research however presents a different form of ethical responsibility for academic members, in ensuring that benefits (*rewards*) and power are shared equally (*reciprocity*).

During this project series it was clear that the '*rub*' of the co-production process stemmed largely from the clashes between the co-production methodology and conventional research infrastructures and processes. Both Hunter and Perkins (2014) and Campbell and Vanderhoven (2016) recommend that universities should change their understanding of research to incorporate the wider eco-system of co-production and take active steps to develop and encourage community partnering, including financial support. This means widening the boundaries around research processes to recognise that co-production starts with the formation of partnerships rather than a pre-determined research question. Issues with adhering to university ethical constraints, institutional budgeting requirements to pay expenses, and even sub-contracting arrangements, were all experienced as disempowering and patronising for both the community researchers and the intermediary.

The research partnership resonates with the '*relationships*' theme from our reflection. We identify '*relationships*' as a vital component to the co-production process. Without developing a trusting relationship and engaging in reciprocal working, decision-making could have become dominated by academic theory rather than bottom-up community-driven ideas. As identified by Hunter and Perkins (2014), relational factors between research partners are more important than the structure of the partnership, and, as Manikam et al. (2016) found, community researchers often identify different needs and agendas to academic researchers. Hunter and Perkins (2014) suggest that partnerships can be 'over-engineered' (p.15) which can reduce flexibility and reduce the space for people to think and explore. While our academic partners experienced the co-production as, at times, messy and out-of-control, this may have been the essential creative space required for community partner exploration and thinking.

This broadening of boundaries should also to extend to greater sensitivity in ethical oversight, recognising the rights of representation and self-determined risk-taking of community partners/participants. As our evidence of '*reciprocity*' and '*risk*' suggests, community partners can feel constrained by the processes of research ethics, and that their choices are not taken into account. While right to representation is part of the Social Research Association Ethical Guidelines (2003), current practice and protectionism favour risk aversion over facilitating representation. It

could be suggested that another 'R' in the *aide memoire* could be '*respect*'; respect for the right of community researchers to represent themselves and be self determining.

Commissioners and funders of research are also recommended by Campbell and Vanderhoven (2016) to widen their recognition of what constitutes research and evidence generation. Co-production represents a wider way of knowing (epistemology) that in many ways better meets the needs of policy and practice commissioners. Boyle et al. (2010) also identify that co-production requires change in the systems and structures of public services to enable co-production to work effectively in changing services. As we found in our '*robust*' theme, co-production research can identify community-generated key problems, and problem-solving strategies, and establish a receptive bed for implementation through community ownership and ecological validity (Durose et al., 2015). It has been found in this reflection ('*reason*' and '*risk*') that, when funder expectations set the agenda for the research, this can be at odds with the direction co-produced research may take and what it may produce. Therefore, co-production should involve consultation between all stakeholders at an early stage that incorporates agreed aims, objectives and wider community impacts.

It is helpful that the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in England has widened the measurement of research activity to include 'wider impact' (HEFCE, 2017). The REF is the instrument with which UK universities receive research funding from the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE). Therefore, the REF standards dictate university structures to support research. REF impact allows universities to widen the required outcomes for their researchers to include activities with social benefit. However, as Pain et al (2015) have identified, parameters of 'impact' must be wider still to accommodate the evidence that co-production can generate.

## **Conclusion**

The Recovery Voice in Action project series provides useful insights into a number of key questions. What do we need in order to 'do' co-productive research? What gets in the way? What are the key threats? What are the benefits and why bother? The emerging themes point to a willingness to challenge ourselves, as academics and community researchers, and to remain open and explorative. Whilst the commitment to see everyone involved as an 'asset' may be increasingly prevalent in the

narrative of co-productive research and public involvement, the reality of what this means in practice is less clear. Mutuality, trust and partnership are easy to say, but investment in the building blocks of this requires sustained investment and a level playing field to avoid these principles becoming tokenistic. Rigid research infrastructure and lack of support for community partners pose a real threat to the potential of co-productive research to help explore the issues and impacts of drug and alcohol problems for individuals, communities and society as a whole.

At the heart of this is the requirement for a continued and sustained interrogation that explores the potential imbalance of power. This is manifested through access to and control of resources to further develop understanding of the nature of co-produced evidence and recognise its value. But this needs to be not simply a contribution to the research ‘system’ but a recognition of its contribution to a real and equal relationship that results in social change.

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Declaration of interest:

The authors declare no conflict of interest.